

Differences between Aboriginal languages and English

"From the purely linguistic point of view, Aboriginal languages are vastly different from Standard English," (Christie, 1985:64). The following distinctions are generalisations, adapted from Christie (1985) and Eades (1993). Throughout Australia it is estimated that there are currently 200 Indigenous languages and dialects still in use, with anything from a few people to over a thousand people in any individual language group. There are four broad areas of difference between English and Indigenous languages:

- Phonology (the sound system of a language: accent and pronunciation)
- Grammar (the ways in which individual units of meaning are combined)
- Socio-linguistics (the function of the language)
- Semantics (the meanings).

Phonology: Most Australian Indigenous Languages have about 22 sounds. English has about 45 sounds and it is often difficult to determine correct spellings, as sounds do not consistently apply to the same written symbol. However, translated Aboriginal languages can correlate each sound with a written symbol, and this does not vary. Some Indigenous languages use glottal stops, where a sound is cut short by the closing of the throat. A notable difference, for example, is that a sound often used on the end of words in English, such as *ng* can be found on the beginnings of words in Aboriginal languages. Many varieties of Aboriginal English have no *h* sound at the beginning of the word and rarely have *f*, *v* or *th* sounds. Thus an Aboriginal English speaker may change these sounds to other consonants such as *p* or *b*, or *t* or *d* when speaking in English.

Grammar: This refers to rules of syntax by which words are used in a language in systematic patterns. English grammar can be difficult to teach to Indigenous students as many Indigenous languages rely on structuring of words with suffixes, prefixes and infixes, rather than the sequencing or pattern of words so word order in most Aboriginal languages can be scrambled as it is the suffixes etc that signify grammatical functions. Two examples of grammar that can impact on student learning are that many varieties of Aboriginal English don't have an *s* sound while SAE plurals often use *s*, and in some varieties of AE, *he* (or *'e*) is used to mean either *he* or *she*.

Socio-linguistic: This aspect of language defines its function, and for Indigenous people this is one of the most important structures within their culture. Indigenous people have highly structured relationship systems which determine the ways in which people relate to each other. With each relationship comes a set of rules that requires appropriate language use and behaviours. The genres used for constructing English oral language must be explicitly taught, for example asking and answering questions. In some Aboriginal languages it is acceptable to ignore questions, and hypothetical questions are rarely used. Educators must be aware that there are many socio-linguistic rules in Aboriginal languages that go with interpersonal behaviours that can be easily misinterpreted.

Semantics: Indigenous languages, as in most languages, have generic roots for certain classifications of things, although between languages and cultures items are classified differently. Many English words are based on Greek and Latin roots, and have a similar/common prefix, suffix or base. Indigenous languages may have generic roots for different systems of classification within their world. It must also be noted that many terms are not translatable from language to language. Christie (1985:17) suggests that these things can be "talked around in simple terms." Then again, one English word may take a whole sentence in an Indigenous language, and vice versa. "Language(s) depend upon a certain configuration of culture-specific meanings which can be communicated through a language," (Christie, 1985:20). It is therefore essential we understand that, with teaching languages, we are also teaching the culture that goes with them.

Kumunjayi words

All languages are dynamic and change with time. A common feature of Indigenous languages is the elimination of words associated with a deceased person's name. In traditional times, languages changed accordingly, but with the adoption of English names, some English words may become taboo. Usually, when a person dies, their name is not to be used, and others with the same name change to a different name. It may be the case that words that rhyme with, or sound similar to, the deceased person's name will also go out of use, depending on the family and their preference. In some Aboriginal cultures the name and associated words will not be used for a certain period of time, and in others, the words are never to be used again.

This can be disconcerting for teachers using English as a teaching tool, when a number of words cannot be used at all. It is a very sensitive aspect of language use with Indigenous peoples, and a word used inappropriately can cause great offence. Indigenous staff or school management will usually keep staff up-to-date with words that cannot be spoken in communities. When using texts for teaching, some words may have to be substituted in keeping with local language situation. For teachers in urban settings, it would be very difficult to find out about such words, however, it may explain why an Indigenous student seems reluctant to use certain words.

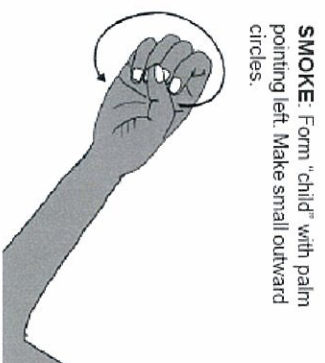
The terminology for 'a word that cannot be used' varies between communities. In Warlpiri it is known as a *kumunjayi*-word, and the word *kumunjayi* may be spoken as a substitute in order to convey a message until such time as the word is replaced. In Arrrente language the noun *kumanja* is used, and in Tiwi language the word is *pukamani*.

Aboriginal Hand-Talk

Non-verbal communication is a common feature of many Indigenous languages and is known as sign language or *Hand Talk*. The signs can be interpreted from quite some distance away, and can convey complex information. These sign languages have evolved alongside the spoken languages, so the signs may not be interpreted without knowledge of that particular language. Indigenous students will be familiar with the Hand Talk related to their first language and therefore the concept of non-verbal communication. Hand Talk has many purposes: it is used during hunting, within certain ceremonies and in everyday communication. There are some communities where particular relatives in mourning are not allowed to speak for a period of time, and use Hand Talk to communicate.

It is also important to note that non-verbal communication varies between cultures and some hand signals widely accepted in non-Indigenous cultures may be considered inappropriate in other cultures. Examples of use of body language in Indigenous communities include: pointing with the lips rather than with the index finger, beckoning with a downward motion rather than with palm upwards, and raising of eyebrows rather than shrugging shoulders to indicate that they don't know.

Two Warlpiri hand signs



Language learning

In the early years of schooling, language learning is generally integrated across the Learning Areas and language competence is developed in context. Children who speak English as their first language usually come to school with a range of language that is applicable to all Learning Areas. For example

- **attribute** words (big, little, green)
- **position** words (on, in, under, behind)
- **comparison** words (small, more)
- **question** words (were, when, where, why, what)
- **conjunctions** (but, because, and).

They may come with **comparative** and **superlative** language eg small, smaller, smallest; tall, taller, tallest. However, literacy demands increase in complexity and difficulty as learners move through their schooling. The use of concrete examples and illustrations is progressively reduced and there is increasing reliance on abstract terminology to construct and communicate knowledge in the specialised language styles of different Learning Areas. This has particular ramifications for those learners who speak English as a second language or dialect.

If learners are experiencing difficulty with the literacy demands of the Learning Area they are likely to have difficulty demonstrating evidence of learning.

Language enables access to learning and learners need to take an active part in the learning process. Learners will make meaning by connecting new experiences to existing understandings. Success at school is more likely if there is overlap between life and school experiences and meaningful connections with the learner's life can be made.

In many Learning Areas, especially as learners move into the middle years of schooling

- the language used may include many new or unfamiliar words
- meanings of some words are different from day-to-day meanings
- the subject matter may not be part of the learner's experience
- the subject matter may be abstract
- many subject specific words are introduced eg habitat, species, genus, polygon and prism which have no 'general' meaning
- some commonly used words change meaning or are used more precisely in particular contexts eg concentration, tables, aim, element, compound, face, even.

Common areas of difficulty

The following features of Standard Australian English have the potential to cause problems for students learning SAE as their second language or dialect.

- Hearing the different sounds of English. There are sounds in English that are not in Indigenous languages, and there are sounds in Indigenous languages that are not in English.
- Identifying individual words in an utterance. ESL students may also be unfamiliar with written English, where you can easily see the words as individual units, so they may hear some words as running together and not be able to distinguish them. Many Indigenous languages build large words by placing suffixes, prefixes and infixes on a base word, and may expect English to be structured similarly until they are taught the differences.

- Many English words sound and/or look the same, but have very different meanings eg wait/weight, table/table, plane/plain, cell/cell/sell
- Connectives such as since, however, relative to, likewise, or, and/or and therefore are often misunderstood or overlooked but are critical to understanding
- Verbs such as indicate, demonstrate, illustrate, compare
- Words/phrases of reference such as 'those', 'this' is achieved by, 'using this method'.
- Singular/plural in nouns and verbs
- Tense
- Possession
- Pronouns
- Prepositions
- Questioning



Indigenous and migrant ESL learners develop proficiency in English through the school curriculum and gain specialised language and cultural understandings often with little support beyond the school context. Some ESL learners may also have to master new ways of organising knowledge and structuring texts that may differ from those learnt in gaining literacy in their first language. Therefore, teachers need to

- be aware of learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Recognising speakers of Kriol and Aboriginal English can be difficult because some of the English-based language (light Kriol or Aboriginal English) spoken by learners sounds similar to English.
- affirm and acknowledge home language in order to encourage participation and engagement
- develop programs that are contextual, valued and that incorporate cultural knowledge and pluralism
- action programs that cater for ESL/ESD students, reflect current best practice in ESL/ESD pedagogy and successfully achieve targeted outcomes.

It is important that teachers analyse the demands of the Learning Areas they teach and integrate language support for learning within their teaching, and promote language development through their teaching. Teachers and assistant teachers need to consider whether it's possible to explain and discuss western concepts in students' first language and then consider what language(s) they'll use as the language of instruction. Consideration may also include working out how to use the relevant Indigenous language to describe a particular concept.

Material	Soluble	Insoluble in H ₂ O
Salt	✓	
Sugar	✓	
CuSO ₄	✓	



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It is important to find out some of the basic features of the languages spoken by learners in your classes to become more aware of areas that might cause confusion/difficulty in their *learning in and/or of English* eg

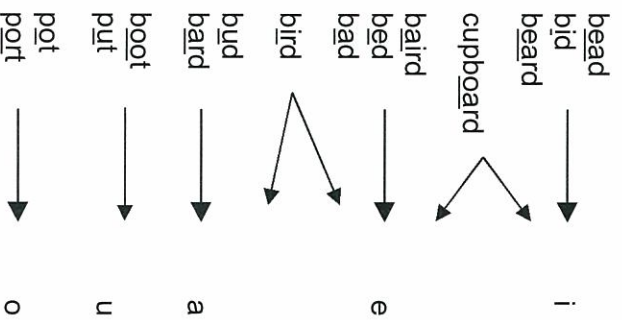
- o Kriol (different ways of using **prepositions** such as *next to*, *under*, *on/in* and different ways of expressing **plurals** such as *big mob* (group or a lot of), *too much* (a lot), *half* (a piece), *one horse*, and not using 's' to signify plural)
- o English sounds that are not distinguished in some Aboriginal languages but can change meaning of words in English (right/ride, big/fig, ma/tmath)
- o how concepts such as distance (references to landmarks and environment eg seasons) and time (ie not chronological but related to events, people, places) are represented.

Some English Sounds

that aren't distinguished in some Aboriginal languages as in English.

ch/sh (chop/shop)	d/th (dirty/thirty)
ch/sh (catch/cash)	d/t (den/ten)
b/f (big/fig)	t/th (tree/three)
p/sp (pot/spot)	b/v (bibeo/video)

Vowel sounds in English and Kriol



Katherine Regional Aboriginal Language Centre

Aboriginal English sounds compared with Standard English sounds

Standard English *will be heard and pronounced as* Aboriginal English

p	b	b
f	f	
v	v	
t	d	d
d	d	
th	sh	j
s	c	
z	j	
k		g
g		

When **written texts** are to be used as part of the teaching/learning process, the following are some points to consider in relation to ESL/ESD learners:

- Are there adequate headings and sub-headings in the text?
- Are there graphics such as lists, tables, time lines and arrows showing causality?
- Are plenty of examples given?
- Are sentences long and complex or short and clear enough for learners to understand ie no more than three clauses per sentence?
- Are key words in instructions made to stand out eg bold print?
- Are models provided in written activities where learners are required to complete tasks?
- Do illustrations/diagrams/tables appear on the same page as the explanation or definition?
- Is there a glossary of difficult terms at the end of the chapter? Is there a chapter summary?
- Does the text overwhelm the reader by being too print dense ie is there white space and/or illustrations to relieve the print?
- Is there implied knowledge from another source not otherwise addressed within the book?
- Do the activities/questions ensure understanding of the content or do they require only recall?
- Do the key questions and /or issues stand out clearly or are they buried within the text?

(adapted from *Teaching and Learning Strategies for ESL Learners R-12*, 1993)